

A Place for Growth – GRAS and the Political Silkscreen Workshop

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[T]he poster is a printed design of images and words on paper, produced in large numbers for the purposes of publicizing its subject through visual display.¹

The main aim of any poster is to promote or communicate to the viewer a set of beliefs, not necessarily to 'sell' these, but at least to make people think – think about issues they had not considered important in their lives previously. The natural progression is then for the viewer to take action, to demonstrate, to make a stance and to let the poster's voice echo in the streets until it is known by all. At the end of the 1960s critique and rebellion was on the horizon and protest movements sprung up throughout Europe; Norway was no exception, and the poster became a strong voice to the masses. Ideologies were far from dead and Western systems along with their conventions were being contested by both critique and revolt from radical oppositions around Europe. In Norway radicals were found at discussions, often study circles, organised by the articulated Left. The areas under discussion were topical of the sixties: capitalism, consumer society, authoritarian indoctrination and repressive tolerance, imperialism, exploitation and the developing world, class consciousness, worker power and people fronts. Furthermore, at the start of the seventies environmental issues and the ever imminent atomic threat joined the debate. In the late sixties socialist radicalism flourished and 'actions' and demonstrations saw theory being put into everyday practice all over the country.

This article will present an overview of the Norwegian graphics workshop GRAS with a focus on its socio-political influence, of which its 1971 folder exhibition was indicative. The serigraphs or silkscreens on display in 1971 were important for several reasons, in particular they demonstrate how differing styles can be used within a communal workshop with a common political stance, and therefore these elements will form the core of the discussion about GRAS. Because of the size of the folder five prints have been chosen for analysis, which were appropriately highlighted by graphic art historian Sidsel Helliesen in *Norsk Grafikk: gjennom 100 år* [Norwegian Graphics: through 100 years].²

GRAS

At the turn of 1969-1970 the Austrian-Norwegian artist Willibald Storn (1936-) took the initiative of establishing the collaborative artist workshop that would be known as GRAS. The pop artist Per Kleiva (1933-) was one of the first to be 'invited' by Storn, and is considered to be the originator of the multifaceted name, although, it was only meant as a preliminary one. To Norwegians the New Norwegian name associates real and true Norwegianness, thus affiliating the group immediately with the grassroots.³ Playing on a broad range of associations, such as liveliness and power as well as growth and aspiration, it reflects a wish to be considered truthful, real and unpretentious. GRAS, as an idea, derived from the communes and workshops that had involved Storn and Kleiva during the 1960s. These had been both artistically and politically radical and in general opposition to the rest of the Norwegian artistic milieu, which was mainly concerned with abstraction and non-figuration at this point. When the sixties saw a rise in the frequency of demonstrations, first and foremost against American involvement in the Vietnam War, the Left stood united to take action, of which 'Et sted å være' [A place to be] at Vaterland School in Oslo was symptomatic. 'Et sted å være' was GRAS' immediate predecessor, in which both Storn and Kleiva started exploring serigraphy or silkscreen printing. Initiated in the spring of 1969 it began as an alternative youth festival, a protest against the commercial 'Teenagefair', and against the proposed plans for development of the Vaterland area by one of Norway's largest banks, Creditbanken. It matured into a Socialist workshop for young artists occupying the school and its surrounding buildings, which were empty awaiting demolition.

Following turmoil amongst the occupants late in 1969, Kleiva and Storn brought their simple silk printing equipment to a council sponsored work commune in Hjelms gt. 3 where they were joined by the art history student and self taught stripe painter Anders Kjær (1940-). By May, the politically committed artist Morten Krohg (1937-) also joined them, and after Krohg had found more suitable premises at Christian Krohgs gt. 28 (ironically named after Krohg's grandfather) a sustainable graphic workshop was established. GRAS was hereby born and, by the way of governmental and council grants, Kleiva, Storn, Kjær, Krohg and Bjørn Melbye Gulliksen (1946-) officially started the graphics collective in May 1970, and it would, as the grass we walk upon, be open to all artists. In the new workshop the little homemade printing table from Hjelms gt. 3 was replaced by a larger vacuum-table thanks to the new funds. The idea was that GRAS would be a workshop for artists interested in the utilisation of the silkscreen technique, open even to artists who merely wanted to experiment. Moreover the collective artistic process was to occupy an important place within it. The silkscreen had not previously been used so vigorously by artists in Norway. Many of the artists affiliated with the workshop, in fact, merely produced one or two prints and then returned to their primary vein of expression. It is important to note that GRAS was not symptomatic of a unified style and as a result its members stood free to utilise individual preferences ranging from 'hard-edge' abstraction to pop art. At one point there were almost thirty artists involved, but the core members were no more than five – Storn, Kleiva, Krohg, Kjær and Victor Lind (1940-). These five made the largest contributions to the group, artistically and politically, and illustrate the variety of styles that GRAS employed. The equipment was communal and the expenses, as well as practical tasks were divided within the group. This in turn led to economic as much as personal freedom, and the theoretical alongside the practical cooperation was seen as beneficial for all involved.

In the seventies, a GRAS serigraph stood for more than just form, and more often than not, the radical attitudes came to life in the images; issues of particular interest were: the environment, the Vietnam War, the campaign against Norway's entrance into the European Economic Community (EEC) and Norwegian artist's rights. The latter is exemplified by *Enebakkregnskap* [Enebakk budget] (1971) by Victor Lind, which straightforwardly illustrates an artist's monthly budget [Pl.1]. In the seventies artists would have 'real' jobs outside of art to be able to take care of themselves and their families, and as a protest against this norm and the insufficient funding of artists in Norway Lind simply displayed his budget. After rent, mortgage, food, clothing, tobacco and entertainment, and taxes have been deducted from his monthly income he is left with a deficit of 290 Norwegian kroner. On show it harvested harsh critique from art critics, saying it was not a piece of art since it was too overtly political and nothing more than a list. Although at first it only appears to be a handwritten note it has been magnified to A2-size and the message to the public is clear – the life of an artist is virtually impossible without funding. The aesthetic value of the piece is contained in its harsh display of reality and its socio-political significance.

GRAS wanted to make a stance against art for the few, and at the same time produce affordable political prints that could hang on ordinary people's walls. Under these premises associated artists turned their attention away from the elitist middle class towards the 'people' and political engagement became a goal. GRAS saw a need for waking the people up through art, as seen in the 1970 statement: "with 'art' [we] mean representations of something that concern us, if the representation is such that it gets that which concerns us to concern us even more."⁴ However, the political essence cannot always be read directly from the image, more often than not a title guides the viewer to understanding the image's underlined political connotations. Kjær's *Lay Lady Lay* (1970) seems at first glance to be a straightforward 'hard-edge' stripe print, yet when the title is revealed the connection to Bob Dylan's music is clear, and furthermore when the song's lyrics are known, as would be the case for the 1970 viewer, a liberal sexual standpoint can be interpreted from it [Pl.2]. The workshop had no rules as to what an artist could produce the only underlying notion was the collective's Socialist sympathies, which were displayed by the discretion of the artists themselves.

In 1970 the Norwegian parliament decided to apply for membership to the EEC, simultaneously a direct referendum was decided upon. Norwegian EEC membership was discussed vividly, and the debate was quickly dividing the political arena, a divide that eventually led to a change in government. The referendum was set for September 1972 and GRAS cooperated intensely with the No-side, which was overwhelmingly occupied by the far Left. The collective produced a large number of posters, flyers and postcards, where Egil Storeide's simple formulations were the most striking. Other contributions came in the shape of partly poetic remarks, such as Kleiva's black and white photo-based *Hausten 1972* [The Autumn 1972] (1972) in which an outhouse, which had been painted with the slogan "Nei til salg av Norge" [No to the sale of Norway], is the main focus [Pl.3]. The campaign posters were also hung up around Oslo by the collective, Krohg recalls maps of appropriate places being handed out at the workshop, although, this was by the most politically devoted of the members.⁵

By 1973 GRAS had moved into a bigger space in the closed Nora-factory in Maridalsveien 3, and was thereby extended to over twenty members. In the autumn GRAS was replaced by a co-op and a new workshop called NORA-GRAS, which utilised techniques other than serigraphy, and whose ideology was no longer determined by political beliefs. Between 1973 and 1974 NORA-GRAS and its equipment were transferred to the organisation Norske Grafikere [Norwegian Graphic Designers] and thereby the workshop remained open, furthermore, a small number of GRAS artists continued their work within the 'new' workshop. GRAS had been greatly instrumental in the reformation of the Norwegian artist's organisations, as well as the instigation of guaranteed incomes for artists. After 'Kunstneraksjonen 1974' [The artists' action 1974] the artist's unions were established on an equal level with the trade unions. Members of GRAS were elected to positions in both new and old institutions because of their involvement in the improvement of artists' organisations and the restructuring of Bildende Kunstneres Styre [The Artists' Council] into Norske Billedkunstneres Fagorganisasjon [Norwegian Artists' Union].

The cause of the disbandment of the GRAS workshop can be attributed to a change in the mentality of the group, the time for collective art-making was over, seeing as they, like most artists, worked as individuals when it came down to it.⁶ Nevertheless, Kleiva and Kjær have commented on the leftist radicalism of certain artists that their beliefs may have led to disillusion in others and contributed to the split. By this time many of their chosen causes had either been resolved or were no longer current or pressing concerns. By 1974 the Vietnam and EEC protests were over and Salvador Allende in Chile, the socialist radicals' last hope, had been overthrown in September 1973. In this correlation, Helliesen connects Kjær's *Syd-amerikansk interiør* [South-American interior] (1974) to the end of GRAS' political propagation, as well as Kjær's involvement with the group.⁷ When the group had dissolved Kjær moved to the country and thereafter concentrated on landscapes. Per Kleiva also moved out of the city, but he continued working with NORA-GRAS. The core members spread through out Norway, Krohg as far as Bergen, where he took up a Professorship at the Fine Art school; however, they kept in contact with each other and are still friends today.

The GRAS folder

In December 1971 Gras exhibited a communal folder in *Kunstnernes Hus* [The Artists' House] in which each print was made especially by a member artist (by this point the group had grown to fourteen).⁸ The folder, which was sold for a meagre 1.500 Norwegian kroner, became the foremost presentation of GRAS and was exhibited simultaneously in the Norwegian cities Oslo, Bergen, Hamar and Skien.⁹ The prints revealed greater differences in style than would have been expected from such a close practical and ideological cooperation and it showed the width of influences within the group. The variety of styles was appropriate for the collection of artists connected to GRAS and displayed the use of geometric patterns, abstraction, stripes, strong symbolic emblems, simple poster figurations, combinations of pure colour planes with figuration and stylised compositions, depicting picture elements. The titles were just as varied as the prints themselves, ranging from simple references to life

and growth and middle class folly to political high stances and critiques of society. The graphic historian Sidsel Helliesen suggests that Øivind Brune's *Grønn rytmikk* [Green rhythm], Kjær's *Requiem*, Krohg's *Do you know how to reach the influential Californian market?*, Egil Storeide's *Vi blir flere* [Our Numbers are Increasing] and Storn's *Fredselskeren* [The Peace Lover] were the most characteristic examples.¹⁰

Helliesen claims, "In their use of both hardedge and photo-montage this first 'large' scale manifestation of Norwegian silk printing was close to their predecessors abroad."¹¹ She is referring to the circle surrounding Chris Prater and Kelpra Studio in the UK, in particular Gordon House and Eduardo Paolozzi, who articulated hardedge and pop art respectively. Helliesen also points to the two American artists R.B. Kitaj and Joe Tilson as two artists close to GRAS, although, they have not been mentioned, when asked by any of the artists themselves. However, she appropriately advocates the similarity of merging photo clips from newspapers and magazines in Storn's *Ofring* [Sacrifice] (1971) and the work of the two foreigners.¹²

Ofring, as well as, *Fredselskeren* are examples of Storn's combination of lithography and serigraphy, although the latter merely replicates both. There are elements of genre crossing and mixture of techniques that were common traits for international artists working in the sixties. In Storn's work there is a poignant mixing of news reports about violence, war and human needs with sensual commercial figures and in merging the images Storn creates a critique of society and implies strong political tendencies. Although Storn might have common technical features with American and English pop artists, these are far from the recording and aesthetics of mass produced everyday items. The closest to Storn's humour and political play might be Joe Tilson with his *Letter from Che* (1969), *Ho Chi Minh* (1970) and some of the prints in the folder *A-Z Box. Fragments of an oneiric alphabet* (1969-70), which imply political scrutiny.¹³ The collage *Fredselskeren* focuses on the photograph of an American millionaire dining with a vanguard of waiters in the background, above which floats a highly decorated outstretched hand containing an eye and a dove.¹⁴ A frame of miscellaneous photographic portraits, ranging from well-known figures such as Mao and Janis Joplin to anonymous Vietnamese fighters and suffering children, has been placed at the base of the image outlining the smiling central figure. Unifying the different parts are flower chains and giant roses, which run throughout the picture plane. Scribbled across the top of the image is a text about the capitalist that is eating his own hand, which implies the irony meant by this image, that is, a commentary on the contrast between the civil population of Vietnam and the millionaire.

Morten Krohg was the artist who most extensively utilised pop art to display the aforementioned divergences in the world. *Do you know how to reach the influential Californian market?* is an example of this, recalling Robert Rauschenberg's flat 1960s compositions [Pl.4]. On top of a pair of pin-up legs a female torso has been replaced by Christ on the cross, and over Christ a globe is hanging as if the punctuation of the letter I, which could easily stand for Icon. The assemblage overlaps the American flag, which might refer to another print by Krohg, *US-INRI*, also from 1971. It has a similar Christ representation replacing the stars and the statement, "Our men are like Christ's soldiers in Vietnam" has been written into the stripes of the flag. Symbols or icons of Western society are seen in the background of the first print: long queues of cars, the pin-up, an airplane and happy families. At first glance one might think it is only meant as a comment on capitalism or even pollution, however, a dead Vietnamese and a car wreck together with the crucifixion build a more complex image with several interpretations. It is obviously a critique of capitalism and its fruits, as well as a protest against the Vietnam War, however the car wreck presents us with death as the outcome of the American way of life and consumer societies around the globe. Yet again we are faced with a pop art print that is highly critical of the consumerist and capitalist lifestyle and far from the witty comments found in American and British contemporary pop art.

From Helliesen's selection, Anders Kjær's print has moved across genres and made use of both his 'hard-edge' past and his pop art present. In *Requiem* Kjær has created a flat and stylised landscape with a stripe-related sun hanging over the horizon, and the landscape

has been broken up by an enormous monument in black containing Che Guevara's photography [Pl.5]. Since Che Guevara had been killed five years prior to the making of the image it was a monument to him and a reminder that his death had not been in vain. GRAS helped Kjær break away from 'hard-edge' and stripe painting and turn to figuration, completing *Ny morgen* [New Morning] (1971), his first ever figurative picture, in the workshop [Pl.6]. This print saluted another Communist icon, Mao Tse Tung. Mao was a central figure to the 1968 generation and his famous statement, "let the thousand flowers flower" was felt to be appropriate to GRAS, and as Kjær put it, "I was a little hooked on Mao because I thought Mao ... was not totalitarian, he was a kind of communist hippie."¹⁵

Egil Storeide followed more conventional poster art traditions in *Vi blir flere*. His simple geometric cityscape is occupied by a May 1 march made up of repetitive anonymous figures undistinguishable from each other, the people, who trace the same colour scheme as the rest of the city surrounding them. There is an ambiguity to them, one is unable to distinguish if they have their back turned or not, however, two red banners are in the foreground which suggest they are in fact coming towards the viewer. In the background, on one of the buildings, Storeide has written: "De tålmodige" [The patient], possibly to reflect the historical endurance of the working class and their breathing persistence. Together with the title the text reflects a rise in number of people partaking in the worker's struggle and that the people's patience has paid off. The print is reminiscent of conventional Socialist poster types more so than any of the other silkscreens in the folder, and contains a straightforward message that the grass-root would easily understand.

In sharp contrast, *Grønn rytme* by Øivind Brune (1942-) is representative of the abstraction found in GRAS. It contains red lines that divide repetitive green bands horizontally. The print leans towards Op-art in the breaking up of the repetitive red lines and making the middle section with its slightly broader lines give the optical illusion that a vertical band overlaps the rest of the image. Brune has further enhanced this by using the complementary colours red and green which should create a strong simultaneous contrast in much the same way the most effective Op-art pieces are made by using black and white. The contrast, however, makes an impact on both colours and a slight assimilation takes place, the colours weaken each other and the red moves on to the green, which gives the illusion that the middle section is a different colour than the 'background'.

GRAS politics

From interviews with former GRAS members it has become clear that there were no set guidelines that stated any political alliance with the Left, but seeing as they contributed their work to the left of the social debate at the time, it seems very unlikely that they would have attracted or accepted many Conservatives into their workshop. GRAS' politics were based at the extreme left of socialist ideology, but the group was by far doctrinaire and this may, to some extent, have contributed to the beginnings of the dissolution of the collective in the autumn of 1973. Radical artists in the beginning of the 1970s were not only interested in stylistic choices and genre-crossing, but moreover in the function of the arts within society and the artist's own role within that society. Many of GRAS' artistic declarations had such oppositional and often radical features, which sometimes led conservatives to take action. An example is the exhibition *Kulturpakken-70 – en gave til Trondheim* by [The culture package– 70 – a gift to the city of Trondheim] (autumn 1970), where the hyped radical nature of GRAS closed down the exhibition. In 1974 fundamental socialist ideas culminated in 'Kunstneraksjonen 1974' and by December Norske Billedkunstneres Fagorganisasjon was started after much groundwork laid by the GRAS members.

GRAS' political contribution was determined by contemporary socialist and communist ideologies and the group's keyword was solidarity, therefore communist heroes, such as Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse Tung, were illustrated to show the group's camaraderie with international struggles against oppression. Serigraphy was consciously chosen, particularly its opening up to the use of photography, as a challenge to accepted graphic norms. Even though silkscreening was not the only graphic technique used by the

collective workshop it was nonetheless the printing process that fitted the group's social ideas best. There is an anti-elitist essence connected to the process, which was fitting for both the artists and their politically engaging inheritances. Serigraphy in GRAS was hence not only a manifestation of international stylistic tendencies, but a conscious protest against the traditionalists and the graphic establishment, who placed great weight on the authenticity of expression and production and rarity that in turn led to exclusivity and high prices. 'Hard-edge' and the use of photographic components were both seen as contradictory to these established ideals. The medium also enabled the graphic artists in GRAS to try other picture shapes than those which conventionally hung on private and official walls. In addition, silkscreens are easily made in large numbers and they are almost identical, the production costs do not necessarily have to be high, which keeps the price per print low and can therefore, in principal at least, reach a large portion of the population. The idea of the collective workshop in itself broke with established artistic norms and it was not only for selfish reasons the artists wanted to take part in the collective, they wanted to make artworks more accessible. The group wanted to cut out the expensive distributors, who often favoured certain types of artists, mostly established and conventional artists over experimental and oppositional ones. Lind, for example, turned down international galleries because of his disinterest in conventional methods of distribution.

GRAS' revolutionary spirit was their belief in modern art's ability to communicate to the masses and although many of the prints were made up of more or less manipulated photographs easily recognisable to a contemporary audience from television and newspapers, as most avant-garde movements, they had much less appeal to those layers of society than they wanted to admit. Their sympathisers were mainly young and urban-based, likeminded people, however, as long as the collective was producing prints there was optimism toward the art poster's potential broad appeal and communication with the masses. Although in the seventies GRAS prints did not reach their supposed audience, today they have become icons of the age for Norwegians.

¹ M. Clarke, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*, Oxford, 2003, 194.

² In particular the chapter entitled 'Silketrykkets seiersgang' [The silkscreen's triumphal progress], *Norsk Grafikk: gjennom 100 år*, Oslo, 2000, 267-288.

³ One of the two official written languages in Norway, the other being 'book language'. Gras means the same as the English "grass".

⁴ As quoted in J. F. Urnes, 'Et glimt av GRAS' [A notion of GRAS], in *Amerikanske sommerfugler: GRAS, politikk og pop* [American butterflies: GRAS, politics and pop], exh. cat., Rogaland Kunstmuseum, Stavanger 2003, 10. This statement was made by GRAS representatives at the exhibition *Miljø-70*, Trondheim, 1970.

⁵ Author's interview with artist Morten Krogh on 10 January 2007.

⁶ Helliesen, *Norsk Grafikk*, 281.

⁷ S. Helliesen, 'Gras og det norske silketrykk', [Gras and the Norwegian silkscreen], *Kunst og Kultur*, Oslo, No.64, 1981, 101.

⁸ The fourteen artists and their works were: Asle Raaen, *Karusell* [Carousel]; Bjørn Krogstad, *Uten Tittel* [Untitled]; Øyvind Brune, *Grønn rytmikk* [Green rhythm]; Siri Aurdal, *Uten Tittel* [Untitled]; Olav Orud, *Kimen* [The Source]; Eva Lange, *Frø* [Seed]; Victor Lind, *Fest* [Party]; Per Kleiva, *Frigjering* [Liberation]; Egil Storeide, *Vi blir flere* [Our Numbers are Increasing]; Anders Kjær, *Requiem*; Morten Krogh, *Do you know how to reach the influential Californian market?*; Willi Storn, *Fredselskeren* [The Peace Lover]; Bjørn Melbye Gulliksen, *Treet* [The Tree]; Jan Radlgruber, *Uten Tittel* [Untitled].

⁹ 1500 NOK may be presently estimated at £130.

¹⁰ Helliesen, *Norsk Grafikk*, 278.

¹¹ Helliesen, 'Gras og det norske silketrykk', 94.

¹² Ibid., 97.

¹³ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴ I. M. Renberg, 'GRAS og den politiske virkeligheten' [GRAS and the political reality], *Amerikanske sommerfugler: GRAS, politikk og pop* [American butterflies: GRAS, politics and pop], exh. cat., Rogaland Kunstmuseum, Stavanger, 2003, 25. Renberg states that Storn himself pointed out that it was an American millionaire.

¹⁵ Author's interview with artist Anders Kjær on 20 March 2005.

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- Pl. 1. Victor Lind, *Enebakkregnskap*, 1971, serigraphy, Private Collection, copyright Victor Lind.
- Pl. 2. Anders Kjær, *Lay Lady Lay*, 1970, serigraphy, Private Collection, copyright Anders Kjær.
- Pl. 3. Per Kleiva, *Hausten 1972*, 1972, serigraphy, Private Collection, copyright Per Kleiva.
- Pl. 4. Morten Krohg, *Do you know how to reach the influential Californian market?*, 1971, serigraphy, Private Collection, copyright Morten Krohg.
- Pl. 5. Anders Kjær, *Requiem*, 1971, serigraphy, Private Collection, copyright Anders Kjær.
- Pl. 6. Anders Kjær, *Ny morgen*, 1971, serigraphy, Private Collection, copyright Anders Kjær.